

Owning a Piece of Harlem

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As it waits to learn the fate of its contaminated office building across from the World Trade Center, the Legal Aid Society has turned its attention to a new home for its Harlem neighborhood division.

On Monday, Legal Aid will break ground at the first building it has ever owned, located at the corner of 128th Street and Madison Avenue.

Built of brick and the width of about four brownstones, the five-story building is designed to blend in with the architecture of the surrounding neighborhood. The lot upon which it is being built had been vacant.

Daniel L. Greenberg, president of Legal Aid, said the new building has both symbolic and practical significance.

"Harlem was our first permanent office," he said. "Regardless of vagaries in funding, we will remain in Harlem."

Legal Aid has about 25 staff members in its Harlem office, currently located on the sixth and seventh floors of the Hotel Theresa. It hopes to bring on another 25 or 35 people when the new building opens next fall.



Legal Aid breaks ground in Harlem



Renderings of the new office, provided by the building's architect, The Phillips Group, bear some resemblance to the agency's Church Street building in Lower Manhattan, which was contaminated with toxins during last year's World Trade Center attacks.

Along with office space, the building will include meeting rooms for community groups, a playroom for the children of clients, a technology center, a legal education center and a legal library.

Theresa de Leon, Legal Aid's chief operating officer, said as the agency searched for new office space, it learned that buying a building would be less expensive than renting one. She added that the Hotel Theresa could not support the technology needed to run a modern law firm.

The building is financed by \$18 million in tax-exempt bonds through the Industrial Development Agency, payable over 30 years.

Legal Aid is also starting what it calls "Campaign for Harlem," a five-year fund-raising effort to increase and improve the services it offers to the Harlem community.

Elaine M. Kurtz, Legal Aid's director of development, said the agency would emphasize services for the elderly, housing preservation, employment advocacy, domestic violence and support for owners of small businesses.

The agency has set a goal of \$12 million for the first year of its fund-raising campaign. Greenberg said it had already raised \$7 million, mostly from law firms on its board and individual benefactors. Over the next four years, Legal Aid intends to raise an additional \$10 million.